

Indian snake charmers urged to switch to fakes

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A charmer displays a snake which he claims to be a 'Gokhra' (Indian Cobra) to the passersby at a snake fair at Khadaitala, north of Kolkata. "We worship snakes, we would never want them to suffer and die," a spokesman for India's snake charmer community told AFP.

Animal rights group PETA on Friday called on India's snake charmers to use fake reptiles during an upcoming serpent festival and spare the animals their annual torture.

The Indian unit of US-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) said snakes were abused during the annual Naag Panchami festival, which is celebrated in honour of a Hindu serpent god and is scheduled for August 30-31.

PETA claimed snakes were cruelly captured in suffocating bags, kept in

tiny boxes, starved or forced to drink milk. Their teeth are often violently torn out, and many snakes' mouths are sewn shut, it added.

"There is no place in a civilised society for yanking snakes' teeth out and sewing their mouths shut," PETA India campaign coordinator Chani Singh said in a press statement.

"PETA India is calling on snake charmers to rein in this egregious abuse by using fake snakes for God's sake," Singh added, saying that realistic plastic or rubber snakes could be used instead.

PETA's statement was swiftly condemned by the Bedia Federation of India, a non-profit agency which represents the nomadic snake charmer community.

"How can PETA accuse us of torturing and abusing snakes? We worship [snakes](#), we would never want them to suffer and die," Raktim Das, the general secretary of the federation, told AFP.

Das said the call by PETA was nothing short of a publicity stunt aimed at making life more difficult for their 800,000-strong community which had been "living a life of penury" in the wake of strict wildlife laws.

"Our livelihood has been snatched from us. There is no alternative employment opportunity for us. Where do we go and what do we do to earn a living?" Das said.

The snake charmers have long been a favourite with tourists in India but the practice was proscribed under wildlife legislation implemented in 2002.

The Naag Panchami festival goes ahead regardless, with devotees worshipping snake pictures, idols or in some cases live serpents.

A small number of charmers can still be spotted around major tourist sites in places like New Delhi, risking arrest as they cajole foreign visitors into taking a snapshot for a small fee.

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